Lateral
JOURNAL OF THE CULTURAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Sohum Pal, "Crip Twitter and Utopic Feeling: How Disabled Twitter Users Reorganize Public Affects," *Lateral 8.2* (2019).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.2.7

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Issue 8.2 (Fall 2019)

Crip Twitter and Utopic Feeling: How Disabled Twitter Users Reorganize Public Affects

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ABSTRACT Conceptually, online activism remains a divisive concept: detractors decry it as low-commitment “slacktivism,” and proponents argue that the Internet is a powerful platform for organizing. Particularly for disabled persons, the Internet provides new avenues for engagement and organizing work by allowing disabled persons in disparate places to connect with each other. While the intersection of disability activism and online activism remains underexplored, existing literature remains anchored to the notion that disabled online activism’s greatest impact is in organizing physical protests and actions. This paper scrutinizes the actual work and impact of three disabled Twitter activists, and wages an argument based on how Twitter activists make other users feel. Particularly, this paper synthesizes affect theory with Althusser’s notion of “interpellation” and revises Michael Warner’s theory of “publics” to argue that such disabled Twitter activists and their followers mutually generate networks distinguished by shared feelings (affective networks, as this paper terms them), and that these networks are constantly being renegotiated and transforming the feelings of their members. The paper makes four key interventions: first, it writes against Michael Warner’s initial reluctance to include the Internet in his theory of publics, by arguing that Twitter followings model Warner’s publics. Second, it performs close readings to describe both how Twitter users’ writings generate affective networks and what activist impact these affective networks have. Third, it identifies and describes radical optimism and the utopic work of “demanding” as constituents of Twitter users’ affective networks. Finally, this paper examines and describes how affective networks shift with each tweet, and how such writings transform the feelings that constitute those affective networks. Arguing in part from my own subjectivity as a disabled Twitter user, I contend that Twitter enables disabled users to organize their feelings according to the feelings they want to have, and the feelings they think they ought to have.

Introduction

> So, as I lay there, unable to march, hold up a sign, shout a slogan that would be heard, or be visible in any traditional capacity as a political being, the central question of Sick Woman Theory formed: How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can’t get out of bed?[1]

What can disabled protest look like? That’s the question to which Johanna Hedva demands answers in her “Sick Woman Theory.” Hedva responds to Arendtian political theory, which has informed much of contemporary liberal political consensus. Arendt suggests in *The Human Condition* that the main ground on which society wages political struggle is the public sphere; Hedva answers that gaining admission to the public is not as easy as Arendt assumes—that racial discrimination, ableism, and misogyny forces marginalized actors out of public view, and silences their politics.

As a disabled historian (though not precisely a historian of disability), I understand disability as an archival condition, a condition that shapes access to the archive. As will become clear, too, I understand social media platforms to be no less archival than a library’s manuscript collections, and just as replete with the production of silences. I share Hedva’s wariness about the notion of a public sphere (and understand that the public sphere is often the site whose materials accumulate in the archive, producing archival

silence). I also worry about the facile idea that social media offers unfettered access to a boundless public, as if the politics of Internet usage and social media access are not reflective of access politics in the material realm ("meatspace"). I am seeking to understand those access politics, then, to understand not so much how disability shapes Internet access, but instead how disability shapes the kinds of activism that disabled people engage in on the Internet. I am not seeking to provide an exhaustive description, but instead to use a narrow assemblage of sources to gesture towards one possibility of what disabled activist work can look like.

I answer that disabled activists use Twitter to accomplish the work of hope. In this paper, I examine three disabled activists' Twitter presences to argue that the work of Twitter activism is best understood as work at the level of affect, and works by the unit of the "utopic demand." First, I think about how these Twitter activists hail audience in particular ways to establish the concept of a bounded network that is formed through shared affective orientations. Second, I examine the ways that activists' followers engage with activists' tweets—liking, retweeting, and commenting, which I argue is how followers affirm activists' tweets and renegotiate their own affective orientations. Third, I argue that these disabled activists engage the affective networks they cultivate by making utopic demands (demands that gesture towards the necessarily more just future), and by compelling affective reorientations among followers. Finally, in a coda, I reflect on the affective impact that these activists have had on me, and what that has meant for me as a subject entering into history.

Background & Methodology

As above, I start with the archival question—how does disability shape social media activism, and implicitly, entry into the archive? To clarify, I am not simply speaking of disabled activists across domains but specifically of disabled activists whose advocacy centers on disability issues. I offer the reminder that while the Internet is a tool that has expanded access to audiences, Internet access also mirrors and exacerbates existing deficiencies in access. Moreover, even where access exists, we cannot assume homogeneity. Rather, we should understand geography, class, race, gender, and the precise type of disability that an activist and/or their audience has as factors that shape what social media activism looks like.[2] This is the kind of descriptive and analytical work I engage in here.

It remains an open question: how does Internet activism interact with other kinds of activism, such as the more conventionally imagined bodies-in-the-streets forms of protest? Filippo Trevisan found in his 2017 study of an anti-austerity campaign in the United Kingdom that social media activism mobilized online activists for in-person actions —that far from replacing other types of activism, social media activism facilitates them.[3] The existing literature also attempts to evaluate the "effectiveness" of online activism—Trevisan's study is a prime example.[4] I would argue that a far "thicker" and more substantive critique is offered by examining the form and content that Internet activism takes on, in order to interrogate the assumptions about efficacity that such questions are rooted in. I offer an implicit critique of those categories here as well.

Studying the Internet usage of disabled Americans is fraught. A 2011 Pew Internet Research Project report found that only 54 percent of disabled adults use the Internet, compared to 81 percent of the general American population, defining disabled adults as those who have "serious difficulty" hearing, seeing, walking, making decisions, dressing or bathing, doing errands alone, or using the Internet.[5] Even this data needs to be troubled, as academics have suggested, because such surveys are based on landline telephone usage, encouraging the data to skew older and towards persons who are not hard of

hearing.[6] But another Pew report signals the importance and benefits of Internet access for disabled persons—particularly those who are outside patient-support frameworks that may exist in cities and better-resourced locales. A report about chronic illness and Internet usage noted

> One person wrote, "[An] online support group helped me learn about the disease and provided comfort in knowing that my symptoms were not 'just in my head,' and helped me take steps to adjust to living with a chronic condition." Another shared, "I live in a small town and it is helpful to be able to use the internet to find others that have the same condition as I do."[7]

Indeed, while not well-documented, preliminary findings affirm the general sense that Internet usage usefully counters the feelings of isolation and alienation associated with being disabled. A 2006 paper found physically disabled individuals reported, on average, levels of "social inadequacy and alienation" 15 percent higher, and levels of "self-alienation" a remarkable 96 percent higher, than levels reported by the general nondisabled population.[8] An earlier paper from 2003 found in a small study that computer and Internet access profoundly increased disabled persons' sense of having satisfactory social contact, and a 2013 paper suggested this was true even after ten years of technological innovation, and held across age groups.[9] These quantitative results conclude that there is a measurable reduction in loneliness among disabled Internet users as compared to non-users.

These numbers are heartening, but what I am more interested in is qualitative, granular evidence about what social media offers to disabled individuals. In marshalling that evidence, I draw upon my own subject position as a disabled Twitter user. When I joined Twitter in 2016, I began to follow disability activists. I also noticed who they tended to retweet or respond to and became more attuned to an ecology of disability activism. That ecology, admittedly rooted in my biases as a disabled Asian American with a particular interest in questions of law and journalism, has generated this selection. Other selections, more inclusive of Black, indigenous, trans, and Latinx organizing are necessary, but I want to be sensitive of the political grammars that are rooted in these identities, to not claim or examine these grammars without the critical intimacy and extended exposure that my years following these particular activists has cultivated.

That said, the users I've selected—Matthew Cortland, Mia Mingus, and Alice Wong—tend to follow each other and others engaged in disability rights discourses. They are active members of the virtual disability activist community, meaning that their presences are vibrant, constantly shifting, and engaged with current events to an exceptional degree. For these reasons, they are ideal candidates for this type of analysis. That said, I am wary of attempting to extrapolate because this analysis (as above) necessarily leaves holes, such as the particularities of indigenous, Black, and Latinx organizing or those of disabled trans organizing. What this analysis motions towards is one of the ways that disabled activism functions online and how Twitter specifically facilitates that, which may at least inform broader understandings of such activism.

Table 1. A description of the activists examined here.

User Name	Twitter Handle	Description[10]
Matthew Cortland	@mattbc	White US-based attorney, identifies as disabled, chronically ill.
Mia Mingus	@miamingus	Queer disabled US-based Korean transracial adoptee focused on disability justice
Alice	@SFdirewolf	A disabled US-based Asian American disability activist, tweets

Wong	@DisVisibility personally from @SFdirewolf and from her Disability Visibility Project @DisVisiblity

How does this analysis proceed? It examines tweets as historical texts, as primary and secondary source materials, underwritten with motivations and making impacts in the world that receives them. In addition, it requires a critical lens that encourages us as readers to "brush against the grain," to recognize that truth is generated by victors—those who have survived and been able to make themselves heard.[11] Twitter and other social media platforms have made some disabled voices more publicly available. But the voices recuperated from the Twitter archive—despite its contemporaneity and apparent accessibility—do not include the voices of those disabled individuals who cannot use the Internet at all, nor does it include many poor individuals, who cannot afford the apparatuses or services necessary for using Twitter. As much as my method attends to the voices that have made it to the computer screen, it is as important to my method to think about the voices that do not, and the irrecuperable lacunae such absences leave.

Among the methodological choices this paper makes is to consider "disability" as a broad-basis term, to not be more specific about the specific communities that fall under the coalitional term "disability activists" by considering individually, for example, chronically-ill activists, activists with cerebral palsy, blind or hard of sight activists. Such analyses, more grounded in the particular shape of specific disabled activist communities is necessary, but this paper takes a broad approach to gesture towards one of the ways that a wider lens of focus allows this particular methodological commonality—the shared work of hope, as I argue—to emerge.

Emergent Affective Networks

A good starting point for understanding how disabled activists use Twitter is their own words. Individually, the activists assembled here have generated a fair amount of public writing that conceptualizes for themselves what social media presence and social media writing does in the world—what impacts such writing might have, and who the audiences might be. These activists, despite their common focus, have different understandings of impact and audience. Mia Mingus writes, "i do not write for able bodied people. i write for myself and disabled folks–especially fellow disabled queer POC.[12] i write to leave evidence, break isolation, heal and give name/power to our people's experiences. i do not write to educate the privileged."[13] Mingus suggests that her work is not intended to be outward-facing. Rather, her writing is meant to be an act of strengthening what she envisions as her community—disabled queer people of color. This is a potent formulation, particularly because of the way it draws the boundaries of audience. Mingus refers to writing, not tweeting—and rather than naming her followers, who are presumably not all disabled queer people of color, Mingus refers to that group as "our people." That is, Mingus conceives of her Twitter writings as part of her larger in-group-oriented writing project. For Mingus, using Twitter—with its ability to follow and unfollow, block and retweet—is at once shouting in a public square and whispering amongst comrades. Private-public divides dissolve on Twitter, as online more broadly: users write for themselves and each other, if in a way that is searchable and readable to the non-user public.

This is rather different from the way Matthew Cortland orients himself. He writes, "I know y'all know air travel sux, but I tweet about traveling as a disabled, chronically ill person because I'm not sure people realize that if it's bad for ableds, we are .fucked."[14] Here, Cortland is not making an explicit statement about audience, as Mingus does. But audience is still imbricated in the text of this tweet. Cortland first refers to "y'all [who know air travel sux]," which might be understood as any person who has traveled by plane,

a group that includes both Cortland's able-bodied and disabled followers. Yet Cortland makes an rhetorical turn, then referring to "people" and then "we." There are many ways to parse this tweet, but one might be to understand Cortland as directing his attention to two different audiences—one that is largely (but not exclusively) able-bodied and familiar with the nuisances of air travel, and one that is disabled. That becomes especially clear in the use of "ableds," in-group language that hails disabled persons. Unlike Mingus, Cortland does not explicitly claim an audience in this tweet (or perhaps claims multiple audiences), and seems to tweet for both disabled and able-bodied readers. But like Mingus, Cortland hails his own community, using a first-person plural pronoun. Cortland's tweets appear to trouble the public-private divide that Hedva decried in "Sick Woman Theory," generating contradiction and paradox. In thinking through and resolving that paradox, I gesture towards understanding Cortland and Mingus not as speaking either to "the public" or to in-groups, but rather, as speaking to and constructing specific "publics," as Michael Warner has characterized such audiences.

Michael Warner writes of a public as being an "ongoing space of encounter for discourse."[15] While Warner insisted that the Internet (at the time of his writing) had not yet developed to provide the kinds of temporality necessary for ongoing discourse and thus, for the creation of a public, I find that Twitter, delineating followers, likes, and retweets as it does, models Warner's theory of publics. In exploring publics and the process of recognizing publics, I also draw upon Althusser's theory of interpellation, specifically the notion of hailing or interpellation, here adjusted to reflect hailing not by ideology *per se*, but instead hailing by affect. Such hailing is the process of mutual recognition—the process by which, here, a Twitter user recognizes a sentiment with other users, and incorporates themselves into the sphere organized by that user's sentiments.[16]

Cortland's and Mingus's Twitter followers constitute "a public" in being characterized by self-organization, the relationship that exists among strangers (each follows Cortland or Mingus respectively), and by the fact that Cortland's and Mingus's speech is simultaneously "personal and impersonal."[17] Naturally following from Warner's theory of publics, we understand that Twitter generates a new form of sociality by relying on the commonality of feeling—shared affective states—rather than textual discourses, per se. I term this genre of sociality the *affective network*. The term draws on a rich body of scholarship on affect, which I use here as akin to Raymond Williams's structures of feeling. Williams defines structures of feelings as "thought as felt and feeling as thought . . . a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. . . . a social experience which is still in process, often…taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies."[18] I find this formulation (taken up more recently by scholars like Lauren Berlant) useful because of its insistence that even apparently "private" social experiences (or feelings) have "emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics," indeed, that affects are types of infrastructural feelings, that texts of all kinds (here, tweets) impact feelings *not only* at the level of the individual, but in coherent and systematic ways. Affective networks (departing from the neurological sense) here signal networks organized by shared emotions, desires, and impetuses. Affective networks signal a specific form of the public, the "relation among strangers" being the relation of sharing an emotional investment.[19]

While affective networks account for Mingus and Cortland, ostensibly, they cannot account for Alice Wong, who wrote in 2014 "I may not be able to join #Ferguson protests in my area because of my disability, but I tweet my dissent! #DisabilitySolidarity."[20] Here, Wong does not appear to hail any public at all, which suggests that this tweet does not function on the basis of an affective network. I return to Hedva's central question, "How

do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?"[21] For Wong, the answer seems to be "tweet[ing one's] dissent!"[22]

Many analysts would register such a tweet as little more than a token act of support—slacktivism, minimal-impact forms of virtue-signaling.[23] But such a register fails, first by failing to consider the particular constraints that disability can place on forms of political action, and second by misunderstanding the metrics by which social movement can be judged. Social movements tend to be judged by materiality—by funds generated in support of a cause, or the number of bodies that march in protest.[24] Yet in the age of the Internet, social movements far exceed the kinds of locality that these metrics presume. That there were protests in San Francisco for a murder occurring in Ferguson suggests the power of the Internet to deterritorialize social movements. Moreover, funding and number of bodies are really each proxies for the goal of activism—to put pressure on authorities in service of an action (here, the protests may have put pressure in service of any number of things, from abolition of the police to prosecution of Darren Wilson, Michael Brown's murderer). Wong's tweet may in fact serve to put pressure on authorities—and may also act as a public commitment to a political position. Moreover, the use of hashtags explicitly places Wong's tweet in conversation with the trending hashtag #Ferguson, which allowed users to search and read all tweets with that hashtag. Wong also uses #DisabilitySolidarity, which meant anyone reading either #Ferguson or #DisabilitySolidarity would find the tweet; explicitly, Wong's use of hashtags connects the two movements and in fact, merges the "publics" generated by these hashtags; the hashtags here play off of Twitter's own infrastructure to connect the affective networks that #DisabilitySolidarity and #Ferguson organize.

What do affective networks do?

It emerges, then, that social movements are rooted in affective networks—if we find that social movements tend to put pressure on groups in power in service of seeing a certain choice being made, then it follows that movements require some degree of shared desire amongst their constituents. Here, I think about what work "likes" and "retweets" do, and what the affective impact is of such engagement between activists and their Twitter followers. I then think about the affect of such activism itself. I begin by tracking the discourse around the 2016 United States presidential election.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, the activists this paper follows were not very active on Twitter. Among those who were, however, was Disability Visibility Project. DVP was active throughout November 10th, 2016, electing to organize a live Twitter chat on post-election organizing, as the account posted, "If you have the energy & want connect w/ disabled folks, join #CripTheVote TODAY, 7 pm ET. Let's see #WhatsNext."[25] DVP was engaged, virtually, in much of the same work that activists were doing outside the Internet—creating safe-spaces. Those safe-spaces are composed of affective networks, as DVP indicates in explicitly hailing other disabled people—people who share identity groups, but also those who "want [to] connect," indicating shared desire. DVP also hailed an alternative network, however—those groups who shared an affective sense of grief and exhaustion, tweeting, "It's ok if you're not ready to think about #WhatsNext and need time to just be. Your survival and existence matters. #CripTheVote."[26] The public that DVP is hailing is not composed of complacent individuals who are disinterested in protest—rather, DVP is hailing those who are "not ready" to protest and "need time." In this way, Disability Visibility Project attenuates the contours of the network it is tapping. Moreover, these networks are engaged in the active process of mutual recognition that Althusser denotes as *hailing*: users actively engaged in reaffirming the messaging of

Disability Visibility Project, liking and retweeting each tweet, although each tweet generated very few replies.[27]

Filippo Trevisan found in *Disability Advocacy Online* that organizations tended to use Facebook to generate commentary from their followers and to disseminate information about protests.[28] That is operatively distinct from the work being done on Twitter, where likes and retweets do not generate commentary, but serve to reaffirm Disability Visibility Project's messaging and to indicate that a tweet expresses a sentiment that is appreciated or shared. In other words, the very act of retweeting or liking a tweet signals to Twitter users *an active stake in the affective community organized by that Twitter persona and their affect.*

What may be interesting, too, is how different activists strike the balance of affective networking (that is, generating and hailing an affective network) with organizing. While Disability Visibility Project may be understood as taking a two-pronged approach (indicated by hailing two different networks), Mia Mingus renders the processes of grief and protest as two components of a singular operation. On November 9, 2016, after the election results had become public, Mingus tweeted, "feeling deep sadness and grief for what is, mixed with determination and purpose for what can be. sending love and courage to all our folks."[29] Mingus is clear in having a deep sense of grief over the results of the election, but perhaps more broadly, over the national moral and political consensus —"what is," as Mingus puts it. That grief, Mingus clarifies, does not exclude political action, much as Disability Visibility Project had hailed those "not ready to think about #WhatsNext." Mingus expresses hope for a new political consensus and for the power of protest politics—"what can be." As such, the discourse Mingus engages with suggests a new way of thinking about the very work of activism—radical optimism.

Twitter and the Work of Hope

Feminist labor scholar Kathi Weeks writes of utopia that

> by providing a vision or glimmer of a better world, particularly one grounded in the real-possible, the utopia can serve to animate political desire, to engage our aspirations to new and more gratifying forms of collectivity. Beyond provoking desire, utopias can also inspire the political imagination, encourage us to stretch that neglected faculty and expand our sense of what might be possible in our social and political relations.[30]

In drawing from that understanding of what utopia demands of and provokes in us, what I interrogate here is how disabled Twitter users, in engaging with affective networks, also do affective work—the work of "animat[ing] political desire and "expand[ing] our sense of what might be possible." Scholars of utopia, including Weeks, tend to understand utopia as a condition of impossibility—indeed, the very etymology of the word indicates the bright line standard of utopia. Utopia means "no place;" if a condition becomes possible or extant, it violates the very standard of what utopia is. But I suggest that the *utopic demand*, unlike utopia itself, gestures towards horizons of possibility, and that disabled Twitter users engage in such demands as a kind of affective work—the work of envisioning new futures.

Earlier this year, on November 11, Mia Mingus wrote on Twitter, "we are not asking people to show up for a day at the polls, we are asking people to change their lives. we are supporting each other to change our lives with love, integrity, care and compassion. and urgency. we can do this."[31] Particularly of interest to me is the notion of "asking people to change their lives—" that is, Mingus demands of not only her followers, but of all people engaged with disability activism (here, Mingus hails a new public) to radically reorient

their lives in ways that resist neoliberal drives to individuation and instead express an ethic of care. Notably, the reorientation Mingus demands is not really a material one, as might be manifest in "show[ing] up for a day at the polls." Rather, it is an affective and ideological reorientation—reorienting one's political and emotional values to privilege "love, integrity, care and compassion" over self-interest and short-term thinking.

This is an admittedly different affect than the one implicated by Mingus's earlier tweets cited here. There is one way of reading each tweet as hailing and reflecting a unique public. But as Warner has written, "it is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time."[32] With that measure of temporality, it naturally follows that rather than each tweet recognizing a different public, publics can shift—that the affective network Mingus hails is capable of change. And that change is not limited to changing boundaries of who is within or outside of Mingus's affective network—but in fact, the affect itself changes. What I am suggesting is that users identify with Mingus not only because they share her views, but because *they hope to share her views*—that with each text Mingus generates and with each demand she makes, followers reorient themselves in relation to Mingus's sentiments, and their own views change (not necessarily mirroring Mingus's, but changing in some way) because Mingus's affects are not consistently the same.

Mingus writes later in the same Twitter thread, "stop asking other people to 'hold you accountable.' that is your responsibility. it's labor we all must learn how to do for ourselves. it's our responsibility to learn how to self-assess & course-correct. stop putting that labor on others. we can support each other."[33] The utopic demand differentiates itself from utopia in precisely this way: where utopia is an ideal future that is also understood to be impossible, the utopic demand is a demand for a future that can come to pass, one that even must come to pass, such as the urgent need for learning "to self-assess & course-correct."

In *Cruising Utopia,* José Esteban Muñoz thinks about queerness as "always in the horizon."[34] Alison Kafer writing in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* writes of "crip futures: futures that embrace disabled people, futures that imagine disability differently, futures that support multiple ways of being. . . . In imagining crip futures . . . I mean possibility, unpredictability, promise."[35] This instability and unknowability is the nature of utopia—of queerness as in the horizon, and of crip futures that are continually deferred. Indeed, even Bloch's concrete utopias are utopic, which is to say, themselves always in the horizon, even as they are the work of "educated hope."[36] The utopic demand is the unit by which disabled social media activists do their work, and the building block of contemporary activism that struggles mightily against accelerating precarity in the political present. The utopic demand is also rhetorically and logically distinct from even the most concrete of utopias: while utopia poses a form of radical critique that can never be fulfilled (this is part of utopia's ontology), the utopic demand offers a movement through impasse that *can or must* come to pass.

I gesture towards understanding activism as much more than "actions in the public sphere," as Arendt understands "the political." In seeking to define an activism that is not premised on forms of exclusion or management of who may enter "a public," I turn towards affects. I turn towards activism that works on the emotional and sentimental level. I suggest that activism is not limited to marching bodies or bricks thrown through bank windows, but that the work of dreaming better futures, of sharing those dreams, and assembling networks of fellow-feelers constitutes a kind of activism—and may even be the foundation of all political change.

Coda

This paper began by provoking a question about possibility—what is possible for the disabled protester? How does the disabled person protest? The answer Hedva comes to is that sickness is an embodied form of protest—that being ill is a condition of being against the state, against socially oppressive forms.[37] The answer I come to is that disabled protesters have the capacity to protest literally at our fingertips, or at the fingertips of our caretakers. I argue that among the many forms of protest available to disabled persons is affective work—the work of thinking and imagining beautiful futures and insisting that such a future is possible. I maintain that activism on Twitter is not merely slacktivism, but that Twitter generates new forms of sociality where categories of what has constituted activism and "the public" fails us. Twitter allows users to organize themselves not only according to the people they know or the identities they hold, but according to their political and emotional orientations. Finally, I contend that to speak of emotion in this way is to try and put a fine point on a slippery phenomenon. At once, humans have emotions and we recognize them in others. We share our emotions, setting off chains of emotional reorientation within our own networks. Apparently, emotions exist inside of us, yet they also seem to organize us as an outside force. The activists I've examined here (and activists-at-large, I believe) do complex and sophisticated kinds of emotion- in organizing and transforming their affective networks.

A disabled Twitter user named Beth Caldwell wrote once that "if the advocacy is keeping people alive, then the advocacy is worth doing."[38] Matthew Cortland, quoting Caldwell, goes to on to assert that this is the philosophy that keeps him going, that Caldwell had said it to him before she died. I read Caldwell's philosophy and Cortland's endorsement of it as speaking to the physical necessity of maintaining life, but also to the affect and desire of wanting to keep living. Under the current political consensus in the United States, and globally where neoliberal governments remain entrenched in power, disabled persons are fighting to stay alive, eking out just enough money to buy one's medications for the month or to keep the heat on. "Keeping people alive" is a high bar under these conditions—and that is only speaking of physical life. To speak of online advocacy in an era of constant physical precarity for marginalized persons can feel like farce.

I have thought throughout this paper as a scholar—a disabled one perhaps, but one who is rigorously deferent to the norms of capacity set by the academy. At times, in its granularity, this work has become anthropological. But I am not a scholar from the outside looking in. I am instead a scholar writing about subjects near to him in position. I am writing from a very close place. And in exhibiting the kinds of reflexivity demanded by the academy, as well as to offer some consideration of the concrete stakes that affective networks offer, I move now to thinking a little bit harder about my own subjectivity as a disabled, queer South Asian person.

I earlier contended that while voices captured in the archive are central to my method, the voices that could not be recovered also demand attention. The line that divides these groups is not a bright one, nor is it random. These are the voices, as Hedva contends, that remain excluded from the Arendtian public sphere in life—and as historical scholarship has taught me, those are also the voices which become irrecuperable from the historical archive in death. While the publics generated by Twitter weaken that exclusionary power, it stands to reason that it also reifies that exclusion further in other ways. In thinking about my own subjectivity, I think about why I stand on one side of the line and not the other—and I think about how easily I might have ended up on the other side. I think about how hard it was, in my rural, white high school, to keep myself alive.

It was at some point late in high school that I first read Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" and failed to understand it. I did not understand how the words came together. But what I did understand then was how it made me feel—that being disabled, brown, and

queer was not limited to my individual experience of navigating an ableist, racist, and heterosexist world. That I did not embody problems, but that the world might. That is to say, I found myself forming an affective connection to Hedva's public persona.

I joined Twitter in 2016. It should come as no surprise that I immediately began following activists like Alice Wong or Matthew Cortland—because Twitter became a place where I could organize my life according to affects, not people. Despite the names associated with Twitter accounts, Twitter personas are performances that produce affective and ideological spectacles. And more than organizing my Twitter feed around the feelings of others, I organized my feed around the feelings I wanted—empowerment, camaraderie, and optimism—feelings that keep people alive, but also, the exact opposite of the feelings the world tends to produce in disabled people.[39]

What I have struggled most to do in this writing is to convey the impact of Twitter activism. Activism that is as diffuse as this, and activism that does not organize physical protests, is difficult to track. Even more difficult is tracking or identifying emotions in a way that matters to the academy. In attempting to do so, I have wrangled the bodies of affect and "publics" theory and often contradicted these bodies in order to suit my ends.

But I contend that these are problems of language, not meaning. What has never troubled me in this writing is the supposition that the disabled activism enacted online is meaningful, or that such advocacy keeps people alive. Activism works in the affective register of hope—by producing optimism for a utopic future that can or even must come to pass. And in the publics generated online—on Twitter—such optimism flows more freely and more accessibly than in so much else of the world. Plainly, that is the work and affect that keeps people alive. It certainly did for me.

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to Dr. Rachel Elder, a lecturer in the History of Science and Medicine at Yale University in Fall 2018, who encouraged me to submit this work for publication. I am also grateful for the commentary, insight, and suggestions made by audience members at Theorizing the Web in Astoria, NY in April 2019, and those at Mediations: Mediations: Disability, Technology, and the Arts at Stanford University in May 2019. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of *Lateral*, whose critiques were generative and useful.

Notes

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39. I think here of Kafer's remark in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* that "as much as I value my experiences as a disabled person, I am not interested in becoming more disabled than I already am. I realize that position is itself marked by an ableist failure of imagination, but I can't deny holding it" (4). ↩

Bio Twitter Facebook

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Sohum Pal (he/they) is a BA-MA student graduating from the History program at Yale University in May 2020. He is interested in race, carcerality, ability, and archival problems.

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ISSN 2469-4053